

A Nuggets First Emergency off the Boat

By Ltjg. Robert Wise


I had been in the squadron for a couple of months, and we were on a RIMPAC exercise working up for cruise. I was standing my first alert seven when they called, "Launch the alert seven. Launch the alert seven. Contact eagle on button twelve. Heading three-three-zero."

I launched and was happy with how everything was going. I'd gotten off the deck in seven minutes, climbed to FL240, and talked to the E-2 about a bogey inbound to the ship. I thought about how strange it was to be up here without a lead, alone and unafraid. Then I heard the deedle-deedle on my ICS and looked at a hyd 1A caution light on my left DDI. The light went out but was followed by a hyd 1B light. The hyd 1 pressure was fluctuating between 1,500 and 2,000 psi. I shut down the left engine and pulled out my pocket checklist. The PCL directs you to shut down the engine if the hydraulic gauge is fluctuating. This is because the hydraulic pump may heat up and start a fire. After going through the PCL, I called eagle and told them I had an emergency and was returning to the ship.

I started a slow turn toward the ship and trimmed-up the jet. I was 40 miles from the ship at FL240, our high holding altitude, with about 12,000 pounds of gas. The right engine was at MIL, but the airspeed dropped below 200 knots; I'd never thought about being heavy and trying to maintain altitude on a single engine. Finally, I decided to descend to 16,000

feet, our medium holding altitude, and was able to maintain airspeed.

I called tower and talked to the rep. The ship wanted me to hold overhead as they set up for recovery. In the meantime, the rep and I broke out the single-engine-landing checklist and reviewed it. Then our CO got on the radio, and I updated him. He told me they had decided to bring me aboard single engine and to fly my best pass. I started out of holding and descended to 1,200 feet about 20 miles behind the boat. I dumped gas to max-trap weight and put the gear down at 10 miles. At four miles, I got needles and bull's-eye. At three miles, I started down. All I could think about was getting to a good start and not going low. I called the ball at three-quarters of a mile with a good start. The approach was looking good, just a little high in the middle. Once I hit the burble, the ball started to sag. I went to MIL on the right engine, but it didn't seem to help. All I saw was a red ball on touchdown, catching the ace of course, but I was just happy to be aboard.

Looking back on it, my attitude, as the new guy fresh out of the RAG, was I would always have a lead to depend on and tell me what to do in case of an emergency. Not the smartest attitude but one that many new fleet aviators have. I never thought how the jet would act in close, at max trap, single engine and on a warm day. The settle in-close was a big surprise, and I wasn't sure how the jet would've flown after a bolter. Think about these "What if?" situations before you get airborne. There isn't time to think of all the details while trying to get aboard safely. 

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